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Autobiographical Narrative and the Use of Metaphor: Rilke's Techniques in Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge

Abstract

How can first-person narrative establish a truth claim? Autobiographical narrators have traditionally used visual metaphors in order to reinforce the authority of their discourse. But these metaphors have also been appropriated into the vocabulary of inauthenticity. The specular metaphor, the notion of the self-portrait, and the descriptive language that the self-portrait entails have been seen to introduce the presence of the other into the self-presentation and thereby to undermine the author's claim to privileged insight into himself. In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke, writing in an age when an interest in psychological narration almost automatically doomed first-person narrators to unreliability, uses the mirror metaphor both as a theme and as a formal technique to persuade us of the validity of his narrator's perceptions. Rilke redefines mirroring: understood as a metaphor for artistic creation, it implies rendering visible what normally goes unperceived, while as a technique mirroring calls into play a dialectical interchange between the subject and vehicle of metaphor. In Malte's notebooks, Rilke creates a new model for autobiographical narrative, where Malte himself figures as the "absent" subject of his book or the "unnamed" subject of metaphor. Malte gains in authority as a first-person narrator by turning from self-deception to oblique self-presentation, and from referential to figurative language.

Keywords

first-person narrative, truth, Autobiographical, visual metaphors, self-portrait, self-presentation, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, Rilke, psychological narration, unreliability, narrator's perceptions, mirroring, unperceived, unnamed, absent, authority, first-person narrator, self-deception, self-presentation, figurative language

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE AND THE
USE OF METAPHOR: RILKE'S TECHNIQUES
IN *DIE AUFZEICHNUNGEN DES MALTE*
LAURIDS BRIGGE

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The "quest for self" in fictional and non-fictional autobiography has traditionally involved the question of vision. The autobiographer conventionally justifies his undertaking by claiming a particular privileged insight into the self that is the protagonist of the autobiography. Often he asserts this insight over and against what is, in his view, the false image of the self that others have created. Thus in *The Confessions* Rousseau protests that he is transparent to himself, asserting the truth of his vision against the lies spread about him by his enemies. But the autobiographer's authority is open to challenge. On what basis can he claim to be a privileged spectator of himself? His authority is based on an implicit splitting of the self into knower and known, subject and object. But this splitting of the self into two is dubious, implying as it does a discontinuity and disparity between the experiencing and the narrating self.¹ Moreover, in the tradition of Romantic and post-Romantic autobiography it is seen to entangle the autobiographer in a vision that is mediated by the other. For it is assumed that the self can not only be falsely seen by others, but also falsely constituted by the distorting vision of others. The self comes to conceive of itself as an object by being aware of the judgment of others. The "knowing" self, therefore, bound as it is to the "known" self by identity, does not neutrally observe its object, but rather starts to create it, and to create it in a way that reflects its consciousness of the opinions of others. Thus Rousseau never manages to close the opinions of others out of his self-portrait: according to his own interpretation, his character was constituted by others, by the good treatment he enjoyed and the bad treatment he suffered when he was a child. It is equally apparent that the exoneration he seeks as the stated

purpose of his autobiography is dependent on others as his potential excusers. In Romantic and post-Romantic autobiography the idea of self-knowledge becomes ever more suspect as the ocular metaphor for knowledge is joined by the specular metaphor for reflection.

By the same measure, the autobiographical enterprise itself is undermined. The project of looking into the self as into a mirror, the condition for self-portraiture, appears to split the self in such a way that it formally reproduces the relation of self to other. Moreover, recent critics have claimed that the use of descriptive language to represent one's own interiority introduces the other and his discourse into the self-portrait, turning the self into a kind of third person.² The idea of the reductive image, description, or "name," and the fear of falling into its trap, is a recurrent theme in twentieth-century autobiographical narrative. In *Stiller*, for example, Max Frisch plays inauthentic images of *Stiller* off against one another; in *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood shows her heroine fleeing the self-images society imposes on women; Roland Barthes in *Roland Barthes* wants to avoid the "image repertoire," to keep meanings from "taking."

How can first-person narrative establish a truth claim? Where self-description is discredited as borrowed discourse and the specular model of self-knowledge is questioned, and where the very techniques an autobiographer uses to support his claim to authority—executing a self-portrait that is consistent, non-contradictory, and complete—make his self-representation subject to question, alternatives must be found to the traditional self-portrait. Fiction has resources that are closed to writing that purports to be about real persons and events. I take as an example Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. Writing in a period when interest in psychological narration almost automatically doomed first-person narrators to unreliability, Rilke nevertheless finds a solution for persuading us of the validity of his narrator's perceptions. In *Malte*, Rilke echoes a tradition of visual metaphor by showing how strength and vulnerability are implicit in the ideas of seeing and being seen. But within this tradition, Rilke elaborates a metaphor for creative or artistic vision by redefining the mirror metaphor: creative vision is equivalent to holding up a mirror to the invisible. I shall show that Rilke not only develops this metaphor on the level of theme, but also realizes it on the level of execution in the novel.

At the outset of *Die Aufzeichnungen*, Malte announces, "Ich lerne sehen" ("I am learning to see"). Rilke's preoccupation with

“Schauen” (“looking”) is familiar from *Ewald Tragy*, his essays on the Worpsswede artists and Rodin, poems in *Das Buch der Bilder*, especially “Eingang,” and the *Neue Gedichte*. In the autobiographical novel *Malte*, the issue of “seeing”—“seeing” understood here as a metaphor both for understanding and for the creative re-seeing of the artist—is closely connected to the question of self-development and personal strength. In the first book of the novel, which is devoted largely to reminiscences of childhood, it is primarily Malte’s lack of strength that is thematized. In the first story in the series of recollections, the episode of Christine Brahe’s ghost, Malte succinctly formulates what will prove one of his chief terrors: it is being reduced to “eine leere Stelle” (“an empty place”).³ The reduction of the self to “an empty place” is the result of insufficient personal strength. It has to do with an incapacity to defend oneself against adverse circumstances, like illnesses; to withstand impressions that threaten to flood the self from without; or to control one’s own runaway imagination, which magnifies these fears and risks interrupting the continuity of the self from within. Repeatedly Malte shudders at the idea that he might be invaded by a force so alarming and pernicious that it seems external, like the “Big Thing” of his childhood, some thing that will disrespect the boundaries of his self and turn him inside out, like the fever that scatters his memories unceremoniously all over the bed. He is fascinated by other people who seem prone to the same kind of mischance; he identifies, for example, with a man who has St. Vitus’s Dance, whom he sees twitching helplessly down the Boulevard St. Michel. One of the functions of the theme of the “Fortgeworfene” or beggars in Book I is to objectify for Malte his sense of his own spiritual poverty.

Rilke often articulates the theme of helplessness, which is caused by the self’s passivity, by using metaphors of vision that concern seeing versus being seen. In the terrifying mirror episode, for example, Malte, as a child, succumbs to a distorted mirror image of himself. In describing the power play Rilke transforms visual reproduction into verbal domination. When Malte dons a costume and steps before the dim attic mirror, the mirror, which is made of green glass bits and thus gives a distorted image, is often reluctant to repeat (“wollte . . . nicht gleich nachsprechen, was man ihm vorsagte” [p. 803]; “did not want . . . to repeat promptly what had been said to it” [p. 91]). But on one occasion it takes advantage of young Malte’s confusion to seize the upper hand suddenly and dictate an image (“diktierte . . . ein Bild”

[p. 808]; “dictated . . . an image”). In Kleist’s well-known “Marionettentheater” essay, the beautiful youth loses his grace before the mirror and becomes little more than the mirror image’s mirror image. Here, the relation between the berobed, masked Malte and his mirror image is likewise reversed, but much more violently and abruptly. “Jetzt war er der stärkere und ich war der Spiegel” (p. 808) (“Now the mirror was the stronger, and I was the mirror” [p. 95]), Malte writes. Malte is obliterated: “Ich fiel einfach aus” (“I simply ceased to exist”). The metaphor is realized concretely when Malte loses consciousness after a headlong dash down the attic stairs. Just as the immense dining hall of the Brahes reduces Malte to an empty place, the mirror, an object, turns Malte, the passive human subject, into a mirror.

Malte the narrator, who is preoccupied with the right way to live, projects a punishment fantasy onto the childhood adventure. The mirror, normally docile and able only to repeat, revenges itself on Malte for not possessing the inner strength necessary to withstand the complete covering up of his surface. It becomes a malevolent eye that takes advantage of the falseness of Malte’s image to falsify him completely. In the novel’s terms artistic vision, in turn, means seeing “Wirkliches”—penetrating to the essential nature of things rather than perceiving only their superficial appearance. The mirror parodies (or mirrors) the young Malte’s fatal fascination with appearances and wreaks the consequences of his shortcoming on him with a vengeance: like a bad poet, it seizes on Malte’s garish outward appearance and obliterates his real essence.

In the second book, the theme of seeing and being seen modulates gradually into the theme of loving and being loved. Just as it is deadly to be seen, it is deadly to be loved, and conversely, the ability to love, like the ability to see, is an assertion of power. The only undangerous love is unrequited or “intransitive” love, and its only sure object is God, for “keine Gegenliebe [ist] von ihm zu fürchten” (p. 937) (“one need not fear that he will return one’s love”). Beginning with the episode of Malte’s father’s death, where Malte observes that his father’s pierced heart closed “like an eye,” Rilke begins, ingeniously, to combine the metaphors of vision with the theme of love, to establish an equivalence between the heart and the eye. The loving heart is like a lamp that burns eternally: “Geliebtsein heisst aufbrennen. Lieben ist: Leuchten mit unerschöpflichem Öle” (p. 937) (“To be loved means to be consumed. To love is to give light with inexhaustible oil”

[p. 209]). A heart that loves is like an eye or refracting lens that can distort its object or cause a conflagration with its heat.

The novel's final section, the parable of the Prodigal Son, brings together the themes of vision, love, and personal strength. In his retelling, Rilke turns the Biblical story of the father's compassion and forgiveness into an allegory of the son's triumphant transcendence of his family's love and his transformation into one capable of loving. Rilke originally treated the theme of the Prodigal Son in a poem of 1906, "Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes." In the poem, the metaphor of vision predominates; the son runs away from the false images of himself that surround him in his parental home, from a setting that "wie das Wasser in den alten Bornen, / uns zitternd spiegelt und das Bild zerstört" ("like the water in old wells, / mirrors us tremblingly and destroys the image").⁴ In the *Malte Laurids Brigge* version, the theme of vision is subordinate to the theme of love; it comes up only occasionally in an overt fashion, in the window of the house that "fasste einen ins Auge" (p. 940) ("fixed you in the eye") and in the dogs that look at one expectantly. The son's return, however, which becomes the most significant part of the story, has implications for the theme of vision as well as for the theme of love. In his *Wanderjahre*, the son learns how to love without consuming or harming his object, and finally begins "die lange Liebe zu Gott . . . die stille, ziellose Arbeit" (p. 943) ("the long love to God . . . the silent, aimless labor"). In the course of his patient love to God, who does not answer, the son acquires steadiness and "innere Fassung" (p. 945) ("inward composure" [p. 215]). His return shows that he has overcome the danger of being a passive object, whether of love or of vision. When he goes home his family recognizes him, but he is able to withstand their love because he now has an identity that can no longer be altered by the gaze of others. He realizes that his family's love "had nothing to do with him."

The theme of gaining power, which is identified toward the end of the novel with love of God, is elaborated earlier in terms of vision as well. The concept of seeing, by which we can understand artistic vision, is not simply the opposite of being seen, as loving is the opposite of being loved. Malte's references to vision and their implications become clearer if one considers the second, discarded beginning to *Malte*. In this earlier version, the episode of the appearance of Christine Brahe's ghost begins the book and it is given explicit significance by Malte: it is "der Schlüssel . . . für alle ferneren Türen

meines Lebens" (p. 951) ("the key . . . to all the future doors of my life"). Malte explains that the episode contains a lesson, the most important lesson of his life, albeit one he has not yet mastered. This all-important lesson is: "nicht aufzustehen, wenn sie eintreten und vorübergehen, die, welche eigentlich nicht kommen dürften, die Unerklärlichen" (p. 952) ("not to get up when they enter and pass by, the ones that really shouldn't come, the inexplicable ones"). He adds that his father managed this feat, though not as admirably as his grandfather. In the final version too, his grandfather, now specified as his maternal grandfather Brahe, is not even slightly disturbed by the ghost's entrance, but can regard the apparition with equanimity.⁵ His father, in contrast, rushes out of the room. But later, Malte's father manages to stay seated and lift his wineglass. "Staying seated" in the face of the otherworldly—maintaining one's composure, having the presence of mind to proceed with familiar actions—plainly involves a kind of personal strength.

Rilke introduces the motif of the mirror into this concept of power as well. Malte admires his delicate, wall-eyed little cousin Erik for his poise in the face of his dead ancestors. Erik manifests his strength by bringing a mirror to the family portrait gallery. Hoping to find a picture of Christine Brahe in the gallery (not the ghost herself!) Malte encounters Erik, who tells him her picture is not there. Portraiture betokens death; Erik himself dies soon after his portrait is painted. Because the ghost of Christine Brahe walks, her portrait is not in the gallery. Little Erik announces categorically: "Man ist entweder drin . . . dann ist man nicht hier; oder wenn man hier ist, kann man nicht drin sein" (p. 817) ("Either one is there . . . and in that case one is not here: or one is here, and cannot be in there" [p. 103]). But Erik has brought a mirror to the gallery, for as he says, "sie will sich sehen" (p. 816) ("she wants to see herself" [p. 102]). The ghost—the otherworldly—the invisible—wishes to see itself; and little Erik has the strength of mind to bring her a mirror.

In the final section of Book I, the description of the "La Dame à la Licorne" tapestries that Rilke had seen at the Cluny museum, Rilke returns to the theme of mirroring. The last tapestry, the concluding image of Book I, presumably has the greatest significance—even though Rilke probably did not rearrange the order of the tapestries, as critics have asserted.⁶ The tapestry shows a "festival" without guests, and without expectations. It represents a scene of presence and completion ("es ist alles da"), and of eternity ("alles für immer"). The

woman who figures in all the tapestries is seated, and the unicorn is on her lap. Rilke closes the description with the words: "Es ist ein Spiegel, was sie hält. Siehst du: sie zeigt dem Einhorn sein Bild—" (p. 829) ("It is a mirror, the thing she holds. See: she is showing the unicorn its image—" [p. 113]).

The mirror here can be seen to represent artistic vision. It has the important connotation of *reproducing* the object; it makes visible what *is* there rather than what is not. If it gives a reversed or inverted picture, this is consonant with Rilke's suggestion, in a letter of 1910, that art is inversion. Rilke writes:

Die Kunst . . . ist die leidenschaftlichste Inversion der Welt, der Rückweg aus dem Unendlichen, auf dem einem alle ehrlichen Dinge entgegenkommen, nun sieht man sie in ganzer Gestalt, ihr Gesicht nähert sich, ihre Bewegung gewinnt Einzelheit.⁷

Art . . . is the most passionate inversion of the world, the path of return from the infinite, on which all honest things come toward one. Now one sees them in their entirety, their face approaches, their motions become perceptible in detail.

The mirror image in Rilke's conception is consistent with Rilke's theory of art that creation is a form of seeing, not imagining. Rilke, a supremely imaginative poet, did not have an exaggerated respect for invention. For him the significant artistic act consisted in seeing what is there, but is normally not perceived. In "Eingang," the first poem in *Das Buch der Bilder*, the magical act by which the "Du" becomes a demigod consists in lifting and moving a tree, in extending the boundary of the comprehensible world before the transcendent and incomprehensible begins. The imaginative act consists in expanding the world (or multiplying its significances). It does not consist in inventing it; the tree is a natural object. It is revealing that in his monograph and other statements on Rodin, Rilke makes clear that he most admires Rodin for his "vision." He also consistently emphasizes that Rodin did not invent. He writes in the monograph, "Er gab seiner Fantasie nicht Raum; er erfand nicht" ("He gave no room to his fantasy; he did not invent").⁸

Thus he who holds up a mirror captures what *is* there, not a fantasy of his own. Yet what the mirror reproduces in the tapestry in *Malte Laurids Brigge* is a mythical beast, a phenomenon no more

real than Christine Brahe's ghost. It makes visible what the unicorn, as well as the other manifestations of the otherworldly in the novel, represents: what is there, but is, to the normal and unpoetic eye, invisible. Holding up the mirror is a symbol of power, the power to which Malte aspires: the ability to see creatively, in other words to see correctly, and yet to see beyond the constrictions of perception that has become automatic. The power of the artist, then, is the power to make present, make visible, what others cannot see. That artistic power consists, for Malte, in making visible what is normally invisible is documented by the sections on Ibsen and on Malte's maternal grandfather Count Brahe.⁹ In both sections, the visual metaphor is connected to the verbal arts. According to Malte, Ibsen's achievement was to search "unter dem Sichtbaren nach den Äquivalenten . . . für das innen Gesehene" (p. 785) ("equivalents among the visible . . . for the inwardly seen" [p. 76]), to put on stage visible representations of minute psychic processes.

As for Brahe, Malte tells us that he possesses the rare gift, which has died out in the present day, of being able to tell stories. He dictates his memoirs to Abelone. Impatient at her inability to spell a name (which suggests to him an attenuation of the vivid image he sees before him) he cries: "Werden sie es überhaupt *sehen*, was ich sage?" (p. 847) (Will they *see* at all what I am saying?" [p. 132]). Later he demands of Abelone whether she sees the figure he is describing, and she remembers "dass sie ihn gesehen habe" ("that she saw it"). Malte tells us that the Count himself disregards such conventional temporal distinctions as those between past, present, and future and simply regards everything as present, including his long-dead relatives. The Count's childhood, Malte says, lay before his inward eye "wie in einer hellen nordischen Sommernacht" (p. 846) ("as in a clear northern summer night" [p. 131]).

Both Ibsen and Brahe can be considered as Malte's models. This conclusion is supported explicitly by Rilke's statements in a letter of 10 November 1925 to his Polish translator Witold Hulewicz. Rilke writes:

Wie etwa Ibsen (sagen wir Ibsen, denn wer weiss, ob er wirklich so empfand . . . ?), wie ein gestriger Dramatiker für das in uns unsichtbar gewordene Ereignis sichtbare Belege aufsucht, so verlangt es auch den jungen M.L. Brigge, das fortwährend ins

Unsichtbare sich zurückziehende Leben über Erscheinungen und Bildern sich fasslich zu machen.¹⁰

Just as Ibsen, for example (let's say Ibsen, for who knows whether he really felt that way . . .?), just as a dramatist of yesterday searches for visible proofs for the event that has become invisible in us, the young M. L. Brigge also feels the need to make graspable for himself, by means of appearances and images, a life that continuously withdraws into the invisible.

He adds, "Malte ist nicht umsonst der Enkel des alten Grafen Brahe, der alles, Gewesenes wie Künftiges, einfach für 'vorhanden' hielt" ("Malte is not for nothing the grandchild of old Count Brahe, who considered everything, past things like future things, simply to be 'present'"). Malte's tendency to retell historical legends and thereby to make the past present in Book II shows that he is following in the footsteps of Count Brahe.

Does Malte himself succeed? This question might be examined from two different points of view: that of Malte as a character in the novel, and that of Malte as the narrator of *Die Aufzeichnungen*. As a character, Malte in a sense sees clearly from the outset, as his marvelous images testify, but he lacks the strength necessary to remain steadfast in the face of his vision. While his imposing grandfather Brahe disregarded temporal discontinuity and thought of death as "ein kleiner Zwischenfall, den er vollkommen ignorierte" (p. 735) ("a trifling incident which he utterly ignored" [p. 35]), Malte himself is afraid of discontinuity and terrified of the final and inevitable break, death. He expresses his terror in the description of a man he sees dying in a *crémérie*. After this episode, Malte begins to think about possible forms of continuity. He considers the continuity implicit in the blood of a family, in the successive generations of his noble line. But when his father's heart is pierced, and the wound closes like an eye, Malte concludes that the line of the Brigges has ended. A certain traditional view of things, handed from father to son, is no longer possible. Malte comes to prefer continuity in his own lived experience, memory, as a solution. It is perhaps for this reason that Malte begins telling stories of his own childhood.

The overt turning point in Malte's quest to attain strength comes with the episode of the blind newspaper seller. It is the only episode in the second book, aside from the story of the medical student, where

Malte, who has become more and more absorbed in retelling historical legends, returns to his own experience in Paris. Formerly Malte had hurried by this blind newspaper seller. Rather than look at him, he tried to imagine him: "Ich war beschäftigt, ihn mir vorzustellen, ich unternahm die Arbeit, ihn einzubilden" ("I was busy picturing him to myself; I undertook the task of imagining him" [p. 177]). On this occasion, however, he really looks at him: "Ich . . . entschloss, die zunehmende Fertigkeit meiner Einbildung durch die auswärtige Tatsache einzuschüchtern und aufzuheben" (p. 901) ("I determined to intimidate and suppress the increasing skill of my imagination through the external reality" [p. 178]).

It is extremely significant that the man is blind. As we have seen, to invite another to return one's gaze, to demand recognition from others and verification of one's own self from one's surroundings, is a sign of weakness. "Mirroring" in the eyes of others can reinforce, but also profoundly alter or even obliterate the self. Malte is most terrified by people who cannot look back at him at all, because they seem to inhabit another reality. They seem to testify both to the existence of that other reality, and to the non-existence of Malte's. Thus, Malte writes of the dying man in the *crémérie*, "ein Augenblick noch, und alles wird seinen Sinn verloren haben, und dieser Tisch und die Tasse und der Stuhl, an den er sich klammert, alles Tägliche und Nächste wird unverständlich geworden sein, fremd und schwer" (p. 755) ("a moment more and everything will have lost its meaning, and that table and the cup, and the chair to which he clings, all the near and the commonplace, will have become unintelligible, strange and heavy" [p. 51]).

A blind man is the epitome of someone who cannot return the viewer's gaze, and it is perhaps on this account that the blind newspaper seller is a particular object of terror for Malte. Malte's achievement, seeing the blind man rather than imagining him, becomes more significant when one uncovers the hidden reference: looking at a blind man is like looking at God. The references to the divinity begin when Malte tries to imagine the blind man. He writes:

Ich musste ihn machen wie man einen Toten macht, für den keine Beweise mehr da sind, keine Bestandteile; der ganz und gar innen zu leisten ist. Ich weiss jetzt, dass es mir ein wenig half, an die vielen abgenommenen Christusse aus streifigem Elfenbein zu

denken, die bei allen Althändlern herumliegen. Der Gedanke an irgendeine Pietà trat vor und ab. (p. 900)

I had to make him as one does a dead man, of whom there remain no proofs, no components; who has to be achieved entirely inwardly. I know now that it helped me a little to think of those many demounted Christs of striated ivory that lie about in every antiquary shop. The thought of some Pietà came and went. (p. 177)

Malte, then, tries to imagine someone who is as if long since dead, whose former existence only shabby old replicas recall. When Malte finally looks at the blind man, the Christian references continue: “Es musste ein Sonntag sein” (p. 902) (“it must have been a Sunday” [p. 178]), and there is a church, a garden, and “almost Roman” alleys. The conclusion of the episode makes the parallel between the blind man and God yet clearer. Malte begins with a play on words. He writes: “Mein Gott, fiel es mir mit Ungestüm ein, so bist du also” (p. 903) (“My God, it struck me with vehemence, so indeed you *are*” [p. 179]). One tends to read “mein Gott” initially as an ejaculation, but later it seems more like an apostrophe. Thus the blind newspaper seller, whom Malte compares to a “Zeiger” or pointer, a hand of a clock face, is a figure for God: not the old God, who is dead and for whom no more proofs exist, but a God who is inherent in present-day reality, who manifests his goodness in details like the blind man’s new hat and Sunday tie.¹¹ By looking at the blind man, Malte finally discerns a positive moment in the seamy, repulsive, ominous side of Parisian reality and acknowledges by the same measure a transcendent reality. He holds—to apply the specular metaphor—a mirror up to God.

Rilke’s metaphor of the mirror for artistic creation is not merely an intricate and pretty image for expressing a purely theoretical ideal. It is won out of poetic techniques Rilke had been developing especially in the *Neue Gedichte*, cycles that he wrote from 1903 to 1908 and that therefore stand closest in time to *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910).¹² In these poems Rilke experiments with techniques for representing objects that circumvent the automatic images that the mere names of these objects would evoke in the reader’s mind and at the same time capture their essential quality. The mirror, conceived as Malte conceives it—as the mirror held up to

the invisible—can be seen to stand for a turn from a descriptive or referential mode of representation to a metaphoric or figurative mode. As we have seen, Malte's mirror image is precisely *not* the mirror image of realism. It is also not a mere insubstantial copy of an object that is in itself substantial. Instead, in Rilke's concept, a dialectic interchange takes place between the mirror image and the mirrored object. An object takes on reality only as an object of perception, only inasmuch as it is visible or capable of being represented, and a representation, such as a mirror image, testifies to the object's reality. The mirror motif emerges prominently for the first time in his writings in the *Neue Gedichte*, in a group of poems written in 1907-08. The idea in these poems—"Quai du Rosaire," "Dame vor dem Spiegel," "Venezianischer Morgen"—is that an exchange takes place between a real object or scene and its mirror image. "Reality" or importance is displaced onto the mirror image, but the mirror image returns its strength to the mirrored object and enriches it. This exchange between the real and the imaginary is sometimes seen as an erotic encounter that culminates, or would logically culminate, in the fusion of the mirror image with the object. In "Dame vor dem Spiegel," for instance, the woman drinks from her image: "Sie trinkt, / was ein Liebender im Taumel tränke" ("She drinks / what a lover would drink in his transport").¹³

The idea of an erotic encounter between the real and the imaginary allows Rilke to develop a kind of metaphor that I shall call a narrative conceit. A poem presents a sequence of events in such a way that point for point, a second sequence of events, involving a different subject, is suggested. For example, in "Dame vor dem Spiegel" the overt subject is a woman who is dressing (or undressing) in the evening in front of a mirror. The poem suggests, however, that the woman brews and drinks a potion. In "Die Flamingos" the same technique is employed even more daringly. Overtly, Rilke describes flamingos as they emerge from the water, stand on the grass and, disturbed by noise from the aviary, stalk off. But this sequence is set in the terms of an autoerotic and voyeuristic fantasy. The fantasy, difficult to ascribe to the birds themselves, can be naturalized by referring it to the human beings who figure in a comparison in the first stanza, to the "du" (you) and the man who speaks of his girlfriend. By using such words as "blühend" (blooming), "Beet" (bed), "Weiche" (softness, groin), and "Neid" (envy) to describe the birds—words that suggest a human erotic context and a woman—Rilke implies a sequence that involves

the girlfriend as an erotic object. The overt subject and the object of comparison, the flamingos and the human lovers, are “mirrors” of each other; they interact so that our perception of both is put into a new light.

Rilke uses a similar, narrative technique of metaphor in *Malte*. Whereas in the poems the actual subject is usually placed in the foreground and the object of comparison presented through allusion, in *Malte* Rilke tends to suppress the actual subject of the comparison, which is often an abstract idea, and let only the vehicle figure in the episode. The metaphors set in motion a dialectical interaction between an unnamed idea, which nevertheless informs the whole sequence of images, and represented events in such a way that the idea figures as the absent subject of the metaphor. Particularly where the unnamed subject is an abstract idea, the result tends to border on allegory, but even here, an allegorical reading would do injustice to the richness and surrealistic quality of the imagery. Rilke shifts the emphasis too energetically from the subject onto the vehicle, which takes on a life of its own. For example, in the episode of the woman who loses her face, Rilke starts with the familiar metaphor of the mask for social role or identity, but suppresses the “proper” concept, and substitutes the word “face” for mask. He begins, “Es giebt eine Menge Menschen, aber noch viel mehr Gesichter, denn jeder hat mehrere” (p. 711) (“There are quantities of human beings, but there are many more faces, for each person has several” [p. 15]). Everything that is subsequently said about faces reflects back on the unnamed subject, social roles, or on the ability to change one’s outward personality. Rilke finishes:

Aber die Frau, die Frau: sie war ganz in sich hineingefallen, vornüber in ihre Hände. . . . Die Frau erschrak und hob sich aus sich ab, zu schnell, zu heftig, so dass das Gesicht in den zwei Händen blieb. Ich konnte es darin liegen sehen, seine hohle Form. Es kostete mich unbeschreibliche Anstrengung, bei diesen Händen zu bleiben und nicht zu schauen, was sich aus ihnen abgerissen hatte. Mir graute, ein Gesicht von innen zu sehen, aber ich fürchtete mich noch viel mehr vor dem blossen wunden Kopf ohne Gesicht. (p. 712)

But the woman, the woman; she had completely collapsed into herself, forward into her hands. . . . The woman startled and

pulled away too quickly out of herself, too violently, so that her face remained in her two hands. I could see it lying in them, its hollow form. It cost me indescribable effort to stay with those hands and not to look at what had torn itself out of them. I shuddered to see a face from the inside, but still I was much more afraid of the naked flayed head without a face. (p. 16)

One could say that the concluding scene shows how a person can be startled into “dropping her mask”—but it would do injustice to the terror inspired by the image of the woman’s face coming off in her hands and leaving a head without a face to consider it merely a further commentary on identity and role. Rilke’s image is too extravagant to be reduced to allegory.

The technique of narrative metaphor with a suppressed subject is often used to “objectify” psychic states. Examples include Malte’s two fevers, the fever that renders small objects around him dangerous and the childhood fever that forces things out of him that he cannot cram back in (pp. 767, 797). Fear is objectified in the episode of the self chased by the heart: “Dein Herz treibt dich aus dir hinaus, dein Herz ist hinter dir her, und du stehst fast schon ausser dir und kannst nicht mehr zurück” (p. 777) (“Your heart drives you out of yourself, your heart pursues you, and you stand almost outside yourself and cannot get back again” [p. 69]). Anxious apathy is suggested by the dining hall at Urnekloster that sucks all the images out of the young Malte and leaves him empty (p. 730). The delapidated wall of the torn-down house that so terrifies Malte because he “recognizes” it (p. 749 f.) is clearly a mirror of Malte’s own spiritual poverty, and his consequent susceptibility to being invaded or permeated by outside forces. In the case of psychic states, the implication is that there is no proper expression. Here the narrative metaphor functions as a kind of catachresis.

As we have seen in the examples from the *Neue Gedichte*, “Dame vor dem Spiegel” and “Die Flamingos,” this metaphoric technique can be used in a *narrative* context involving a sequence of events. A radical step would be to let one sequence of events substitute fully for another, as an extended catachresis for a transcendent subject. A well-known example of such a procedure is Goethe’s treatment of Faust’s quest for Helena in Act II (“Klassische Walpurgisnacht”) of *Faust II*; after Faust disappears into the underworld, his quest for Helena is obliquely represented through the ac-

tions and speeches of other characters. The technique can be used in another way as well within narrative. A single subject can be illuminated through a series of such vehicles, as if a series of "mirrors" were held up to an object. This concept of metaphoric mirroring is more satisfactory for elucidating Rilke's technique in *Malte* than the concept of leitmotif, for the idea of leitmotif does not imply the interaction that is prominent in any conception of metaphor.¹⁴ Thus in *Malte*, the topic of making visible the invisible is illuminated by a number of triumphant figures: Erik, the woman in the tapestry, Ibsen, Malte's grandfather Brahe. The theme of being controlled by a strange and pernicious force within oneself appears in the stories of the "Big Thing," the man with St. Vitus's Dance, and Charles the Bold's unruly blood. The question of identity and role is adumbrated by the house without a facade, the woman without a face, and the story of Charles the Bold, whose cheek was torn off by the ice. The subject of leaving home or breaking with tradition and expectations is reflected in a number of stories: Malte's own, the account of the young girls in the museum, and the parable of the Prodigal Son, which is a mirror of many of the book's themes and stories.

One could also assert that Rilke expands the technique into one that informs the whole narrative. *Malte* is a first-person narrative that is structured like a metaphor—where Malte himself, the first-person narrator, figures, particularly in the latter part of his notebook, as the "absent" subject of his book, or more precisely, as the "unnamed" subject of metaphor. In the second version of the beginning of *Malte*, Rilke indicated that Malte was an exemplary character by making him, so to speak, the vehicle of a metaphor that pointed to absent lives.

The narrator sees many faces in Malte's face; when he sees Malte's face illuminated by the flickering flames of a fire,

... es wurde ihm gezeigt, welche Möglichkeiten in diesem Gesichte lagen: die Masken von sehr viel grossen und merkwürdigen Schicksalen traten aus seinen Formen hervor und sanken wieder zurück in die Tiefe eines unbekannten Lebens. Es waren Züge von Pracht und Aufwand in diesen Masken, aber es kamen, im unabgeschlossenen und schnellen Wechsel ihres Ausdrucks, auch harte, verschlossene, absagende Linien vor. (pp. 952-53)

... it was shown to him what possibilities lay in this face: the

masks of many great and peculiar destinies stepped out of its forms and sank back again into the depths of an unknown life. There were traits of splendor and circumstance in these masks, but in the unfinished and quick change of their expression, hard, closed, refusing lines also appeared.

In the final version of *Malte*, subject and vehicle are reversed. The “great and peculiar destinies” are present and step in front of an account of Malte himself, which is submerged. But they reflect back on Malte himself and his concerns. The result is a situation of figural dialectic, where there is no clear subject.

Rilke explained to his Polish translator Hulewicz that the historical figures Malte treats in the second part of the book should not be understood for their own sake, but as “Vokabeln seiner Not” (“vocables of his distress”).¹⁵ It is significant that the themes of strength and weakness occur more and more in the episodes about other characters. Immediately after Malte, in an explicit reversal, comes to a different and more positive formulation about death—death might be “*unsere Kraft . . . , alle unsere Kraft, die noch zu stark ist für uns*” (p. 862) (“our *own* force, all our own force that is still too great for us” [p. 145]), he tells a story of strength in the face of death: the poet Felix Arvers, who “hated the approximate,” postponed dying in order to correct a nun’s mispronunciation. The Nikolai Kusmitsch story is a burlesque, a parody of weakness in the face of reality. In the story of the weak-willed student whose eyelid keeps dropping shut, Malte helps by offering his own will. The solitary who achieves self-containment despite the taunts and temptations of the world clearly mirrors Malte. The tale of Grischa Otrepjow, the false Czar, tells of a man who had the will and the strength to become what he wanted, while the complementary tale of Charles the Bold is about succumbing to a greater force. Finally Malte speaks of Venice, the city that exists by force of will.

Rilke’s “digressions” could be interpreted in terms of Malte’s personal progress as a character and even as a poet. The parable of the Prodigal Son can be, and often has been, taken as a kind of oblique summary of Malte’s progress thus far that indicates the point he has reached at the termination of *Die Aufzeichnungen*. The parable tells as a literal story of departure, voyage and return what Malte accomplishes psychically; as the Prodigal Son goes back to “redo” his childhood, for example, Malte recalls to memory his own.¹⁶

But Rilke's oblique, metaphoric technique could also be interpreted in terms of the authority Malte wins as a first-person narrator. The exemplary quality of Malte's experiences, the "guarantee" of the truth of his visions, hinges on the metaphor of the mirror. Malte gains authority as a first-person narrator by turning from self-description to oblique self-presentation, and from referential to figurative language. Rilke appeals to the convention of poetic or prophetic vision, so that Malte acquires authority as a visionary, as the author of the novel's creative re-seeings.¹⁷ At the same time the questionable enterprise of self-objectification is done away with. There is a striking absence of anything resembling self-portraiture in *Malte*. When Malte does talk about himself, for example, his childhood, he describes universal experience. He tends to use the impersonal "man," not "ich," in such passages (e.g., in the description of birthdays [pp. 842-43]). Moods are generally evoked through "objective correlatives." Malte's excitement at unrolling his mother's laces is an example of an experience many children share, and it is made yet more accessible through the comparison of these laces to landscapes.

In conclusion we can say that Rilke replaces the dialectic between the portraitist and his portrait, which is destined to fail, with a successful dialectic between the subject and the vehicle of metaphor. Instead of establishing a relation between an original and a copy, he initiates a quest for a subject whose attainment is constantly deferred. Malte's anecdotes, his stories of absent lives, are like a series of mirrors that reflect back on himself. These reflecting anecdotes do not entangle Malte in criteria of consistency and completeness. Rather, they suggest expansion, diffusion, a halo of significations, the infinite reflections of facing mirrors. Metaphor in this expanded sense is one of the techniques Rilke uses to lend credibility to his narrator's discourse, engage our sympathy for his self-presentation, and suggest to us a non-psychological reading of the text. The whole narrative could be conceived as a catachresis for the self, for which there exists no proper expression. It could also be seen, with its mutually reflecting themes, as a hall of mirrors.

NOTES

1. William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) gives a good account of the difficulties inherent in autobiographical writing, e.g., pp. 21, 39, 50 f., 120, 124 f.
2. Recent theoreticians of autobiography argue that the first person in autobiography merely hides the third person; thus Philippe Lejeune, "Autobiography in the Third Person," *NLH*, 9, (1977), 32, writes, "the first person . . . always conceals a hidden third person," and Louis A. Renza, "The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography," *NLH*, 9 (1977), 9, likewise asserts: "The autobiographer must come to terms with a unique pronominal crux: how can he keep using the first-person pronoun . . . without its becoming . . . a de facto third-person pronoun?" This argument should be understood in the context of a more general thesis about autobiographical narrative that contemporary critics of autobiography seem increasingly willing to entertain: that autobiographical writing actually creates the life rather than representing it. See Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *MLN*, 94 (1979), 920 f.; Spengemann, *Forms of Autobiography*, p. 150 f.; Avrom Fleischman, *Figures of Autobiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 12.
3. *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge. Sämtliche Werke* (Insel Werkausgabe) (Frankfurt: Insel, 1976), XI, 730. Page numbers for further references to this edition will be given in the text. Translations are mine, except where page numbers are given to *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1964).
4. *Sämtliche Werke* (Insel Werkausgabe), II, 491.
5. For an excellent discussion of the two grandfathers as they incorporate two different ideals, see Walter Sokel, "Zwischen Existenz und Weltinnenraum: Zum Prozess der Ent-Ichung im *Malte Laurids Brigge*," in *Rilke heute*, ed. Ingeborg H. Solbrig & Joachim W. Storck (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975, first published 1971).
6. Today, five of the tapestries are understood to be allegories of the five senses. Sight is the tapestry that Rilke describes last, Hearing is his third, Taste his first, Smell his second, and Touch his fourth. The tapestry "A mon seul désir" (Rilke's fifth) is considered not to be part of the sequence. This interpretation of the tapestries was not proposed until 1921, however (see J. J. Marquet de Vasselot, *Les Tapisseries dites La Dame à la Licorne* [Paris: Lapina, n.d.], p. 5). Rilke thus could not have known of it when he wrote *Malte*. The tapestries are now hung in an order that conforms to the new interpretation, but when the Cluny museum first acquired them in 1882, they were hung in precisely the same order in which Rilke describes them in *Malte* (see *Musée des Thermes et de l'Hôtel de Cluny*, Catalogue, by E. du Sommerard [Paris: Hotel de

Cluny, 1883], pp. 678-80). It therefore seems likely that Rilke adopted an existing order, rather than inventing his own.

7. Letter to Fürstin Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, 30 August 1910, in *Briefe aus den Jahren 1907 bis 1914* (Leipzig: Insel, 1933), p. 111.

8. *Sämtliche Werke* (Insel Werkausgabe), XI, 180. In letters to Lou Andreas-Salomé about Rodin Rilke affirms that seeing is the prerequisite for creation: "Da es ihm gegeben ward, Dinge zu sehen in allem, erwarb er die Möglichkeit: Dinge zu bauen; denn dieses ist seine grosse Kunst" (letter of 8 August 1903, in *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906* [Leipzig: Insel, 1930], p. 111). Rilke also writes in the same letter, "Dieses, dass er nichts erdacht hat, gibt seinem Werk diese ergreifende Unmittelbarkeit und Reinheit" (p. 114).

9. Ernst Fedor Hoffmann, "Zum dichterischen Verfahren in Rilkes 'Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge'" in *Materialien zu Rainer Maria Rilke, Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, ed. Hartmut Engelhardt (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974) (first pub. 1968), p. 240; Judith Ryan, "'Hypothetisches Erzählen': Zur Funktion von Phantasie und Einbildung in Rilkes 'Malte Laurids Brigge'" in *Materialien* (first pub. 1971), p. 247 f.; and Brigitte Bradley, *Zu Rilkes Malte Laurids Brigge* (Bern: Francke, 1980), p. 41.

10. *Briefe aus Muzot 1921 bis 1926* (Leipzig: Insel, 1940), p. 358.

11. Ulrich Fülleborn, "Form und Sinn der *Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*," in *Materialien* (first pub. 1961), calls the episode Malte's "Gottesbeweis" (p. 195); Walter Seifert, *Das epische Werk Rainer Maria Rilkes* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1969), p. 287, and Anthony R. Stephens, *Rilkes Malte Laurids Brigge: Strukturanalyse des erzählerischen Bewusstseins* (Bern: Lang, 1974), pp. 197-98, argue similarly. The episode of the blind man involves a complicated reversal from negative to positive connotations. (The reversal or "Umschlag" is, as Judith Ryan shows in *Umschlag und Verwandlung* [München: Winkler, 1972], a typical technique for Rilke.) God must of course be understood as the highest good, as well as the negative instance that does not return one's love. In keeping with the double value of God, Malte suddenly sees the "Fortgeworfene" not as the wretched of the earth, but as the true heroes of strength ("sie erhalten sich fast wie Ewige," and, "ich überhübe mich, wollte ich ihnen gleich sein" [p. 904]).

12. My discussions of Rilke's metaphors in the *Neue Gedichte* and of the significance of the mirror that follows largely agrees in its conclusions with Judith Ryan's more extensive discussions of Rilke's similes in the *Neue Gedichte* in *Umschlag und Verwandlung*, Ch. I. Ryan also devotes space to Rilke's mirror metaphor in the context of her discussion of "Verwandlung" and to certain mirror poems. Hermann von Jan, *Rilkes Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (Leipzig: J. J. Weber, 1938), also writes on the connection of the mirror with artistic imagination in his discussion of narcissism, p. 13 f.

13. Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke* (Insel Werkausgabe), II, 624. In "Schlaf-Mohn," those who penetrate the garden of evil sleep "die Liebe fanden junger Spiegelungen, / die willig waren, offen und konkav" (p. 629). Rilke develops the idea of erotic fusion in the "Narziss" poem of 1913 ("Dies also . . .") and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, II/3.

14. My interpretation is very similar to that of Stephens; what I call "mirrors," he calls "Vorwände." The chapter he devotes to the "Vorwand" concept is particularly interesting; he traces the idea (and the word) in Rilke's work back to the late 1890s and shows how it is consistent with Rilke's theory of artistic creation in the same period generally. One difference is that Stephens uses the "Vorwand" concept to explain Rilke's puzzling and frequent attribution of negative and positive connotations to the same phenomenon, asserting that a "Prinzip der entgegengesetzten Darstellung" is a primary element in the concept. The implication is that one can potentially interpret the "Zentrum" of any given phenomenon in the *Aufzeichnungen* as having the opposite value of the "Vorwand." I find this implication risky. Moreover, I believe that such ambiguities in *Malte* are not traceable to the mirror (or "Vorwand") technique, but to another source, such as differences between Malte's momentary and still limited perception of an event and another possible interpretation that Rilke wishes to suggest.

15. *Briefe aus Muzot, 1921 bis 1926*, p. 359.

16. See especially Armand Nivelle, "Sens et Structure des 'Cahiers de Malte Laurids Brigge,'" in *Revue d'Esthétique*, 12 (1959), 28. Various critics have argued persuasively that the novel presents a clear system of values, even though it is unclear whether Malte himself succeeds or fails. Hoffmann first elucidates the problem in its most general terms, and I think quite correctly: "Während die Person . . . zurücktritt, sich geradezu hinter dem Erleben auflöst, bleibt dieses in seiner Qualität als subjektiv Erlebtes weiter bestehen und gültig, ja, es gewinnt seinen breiten Gültigkeitsanspruch eben daraus, dass es nicht auf eine Person rückbezogen wird" (p. 225). Other critics propose different systems of values. Sokel believes that the novel's ideal is "Ent-Ichung," and that many of the work's ambiguous passages can be explained because "Ent-Ichung" is both desirable and terrifying. Seifert finds that the novel's ideal is totality and that it demonstrates this ideal through a dialectic structure. Stephens writes, "Die 'Einheit' des Werkes liegt in der genau strukturierten Uneinheitlichkeit der 'Person des Schreibenden' und der positive Sinn des Werkes in der gegensätzlichen Symbolik von Maltes Erleben selbst" (p. 261).

17. Several critics have evaluated the novel in the terms it itself sets up, taking the artistic achievement of *Die Aufzeichnungen* as evidence for Malte's success or failure as a poet. Thus Hoffmann suggests that we read *Die Aufzeichnungen* as "poetry in statu nascendi" (p. 239). Theodore Ziolkowski, in *Dimensions of the Modern Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969), p. 14 et passim, finds that with *Die Aufzeichnungen* Malte overcomes his fear of time by creating an atemporal work of art and counteracts his sense of the chaos around him by creating an aesthetic order. Judith Ryan, in

“Hypothetisches Erzählen,” disagrees with these critics, but argues along the same lines; she finds that Malte’s writing remains too subjective to be considered a success in its own terms (pp. 278-79). Anthony Stephens argues persuasively in *Rilke’s Malte Laurids Brigge* that Malte is not primarily about the problems of the artist; he writes, “die Künstlerproblematik darf als Metapher der im Rahmen der Romanfiktion herrschenden, existentiellen Problematik betrachtet werden” (p. 25), and shows the self-validating aspect of an argument that takes the artistic achievement of Rilke’s novel as evidence for Malte’s own success (p. 228).